

University of Michigan lecturers' union imposes sellout contract, isolating student anti-genocide protesters

Luke Galvin, Therese Leclerc
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Last Friday, officials from the Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO) at the University of Michigan announced that union members had voted in favor of a tentative agreement reached with the administration two weeks earlier.

LEO officials claimed the result was "historic" and that the vote was "overwhelming," but of the nearly 1,800 members, scarcely 40 percent voted in favor. Most showed their disgust and disappointment by not voting at all. The total was 689 in favor with 28 against.

The contract represents a betrayal of every major demand the non-tenure-track lecturers have been fighting for since October. The initial bargaining summary claimed the union was fighting for pay parity across UM's three campuses, a large wage increase in the first year of the contract to counteract inflation, an end to the "no strike" clause and increased healthcare coverage and better provisions for job security and appointments. The new contract satisfied none of these demands.

Salary increases at the Ann Arbor campus amount to only 8 percent, 6 percent, 6 percent and 5 percent, respectively, over four years. It is even less at the UM-Flint and UM-Dearborn campuses: 3 percent in each of the contract's four years plus lump sum payments of 3 percent in the first year and 2 percent in the second year as well as a \$1,000 lump sum payment in the final year.

The process by which the union bureaucracy rammed through the agreement was itself thoroughly anti-democratic. In April, lecturers, who teach most of the freshman students, voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike. The vote was more than 95 percent in favor of a strike on the Dearborn and Flint campuses and 75 percent in Ann Arbor.

The previous contract expired on April 20, removing any legal obstacles to a strike, but immediately after

announcing the strike authorization vote, Kirsten Herold, the LEO president on the Ann Arbor UM campus, announced the union would not call a strike. She claimed, despite the strike authorization vote, that many members were reluctant.

When asked by the *Michigan Daily* what a strike would look like, Herold stated: "I wouldn't expect mass picketing," just a "grade strike," and only "for the winter semester, so it will not affect the spring and summer [semester]."

Three days after the strike vote the union signed the tentative agreement.

During the vote on the agreement the membership was provided only brief "highlights" of the deal. As the *University Record* reported April 26, "Further details of the agreement reached April 26 will be released after LEO conducts a ratification vote."

The new contract condemns the lecturers to four more years of poverty wages, little or no job security and unequal pay for the same work across the system. Even more significantly, it represents a political betrayal of the students on campus who, along with others nationwide and internationally, have been opposing the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

On April 22, the students at UM set up a protest encampment in solidarity with students at Columbia University in New York. Four days before, New York City police had attacked the encampment at Columbia and arrested 120 protesters.

Since then encampments have been attacked in the US and Canada, with more than 3,000 arrested. The students have been consistently slandered as "anti-semites," and Democratic and fascist Republican politicians have demanded that the National Guard, which killed four students in 1970 during the Vietnam War, be sent against

the protesters.

On the UM campus the students were early participants in the protest movement and were the target of arrests and threats from the UM administration, itself strongly connected to the Democratic Party. UM president Santa Ono has developed a draconian “anti-disruption” policy, which effectively bans protests, making participants liable to dismissal or expulsion.

The LEO membership, along with other university staff and community members, has shown strong support for the protests, with lecturers visiting the encampment at the end of their picketing duty. But their union is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), whose president, Randi Weingarten, denounced the Columbia protests as “horrific, unacceptable examples of antisemitism.” In the same week “Genocide Joe” Biden made similar attacks and gave the green light for the nationwide police crackdown.

Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee, is a key figure in the subordination of the working class to the escalating militarism of the Biden administration. US imperialism has played the leading role in provoking the US-NATO war against Russia. It enables Israel’s genocide with uninterrupted bipartisan finance and the delivery of war materiel. US-instigated war is spreading deeper into the Middle East, and the US preparations for war against China are far advanced.

The prowar and procapitalist leaderships in the union bureaucracy are deeply integrated into the capitalist state. As Will Lehman, socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers Union, stated at the International May Day Rally 2024 Online Rally, the union bureaucracy, “is committed to defending the profits of the corporations” and “rallying to the cause of war.” Weingarten herself has visited Ukraine as part of this effort.

The refusal of the LEO leadership to call a strike expresses the fear that workers in struggle would join the fight of the students and come to their defense. When Herold was attempting to blame the membership for the union’s opposition to a strike she revealed her acute awareness of the volatility of the political situation on the campus. “There’s so much else going on that adding our piece would be throwing fuel on the fire.”

This cowardly statement is belied by the strong support on campus for the lecturers, including among the protesters. As one graduate worker stated, “If [the lecturers] were to strike and somehow organize with the pro-Palestinian movement, that would be great.”

The students have continued to take a courageous stand, but putting an end to the unprecedented attack on democratic rights will require the intervention of the most powerful section of society: the working class.

In California, 48,000 graduate students and other academic workers across 10 campuses in the University of California system, in the face of opposition, have forced the United Auto Workers union to call a strike vote against the attacks on the protesters.

In the city of Ann Arbor, where UM is located, a simultaneous crisis has developed in the school district, with hundreds of job cuts threatened in the immediate future. Every school district in the country will face budget cuts this year as COVID relief money is ended to help pay for the ever-growing military budget.

The fear of workers struggles linking up with the student protests has been heightened by the tension in the presidential elections. In 2020, Biden won the state of Michigan by a less than a three percent margin. The state remains a key battleground state this time too, with 100,000 registered Democrats voting “Uncommitted” in February.

The new contract has resolved nothing for the UM lecturers. They continue to confront the worsening of their living conditions and continued attacks on defend democratic rights. Both of these are fueled by the bipartisan acceleration of US militarism. The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee (MERFC) is in the forefront of uniting the struggles of all education workers. Lecturers looking for a way forward should contact the MERFC, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

For more information on joining the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.



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